I, GOD

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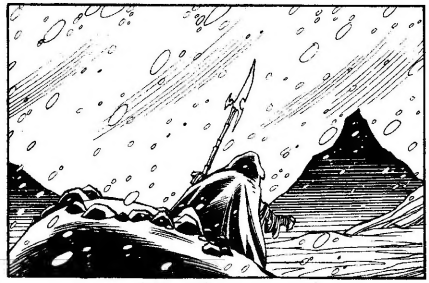
FIRST SNOW OF THE YEAR.

HE FEELS IT ON HIS CHEEK AND DREADS IT.

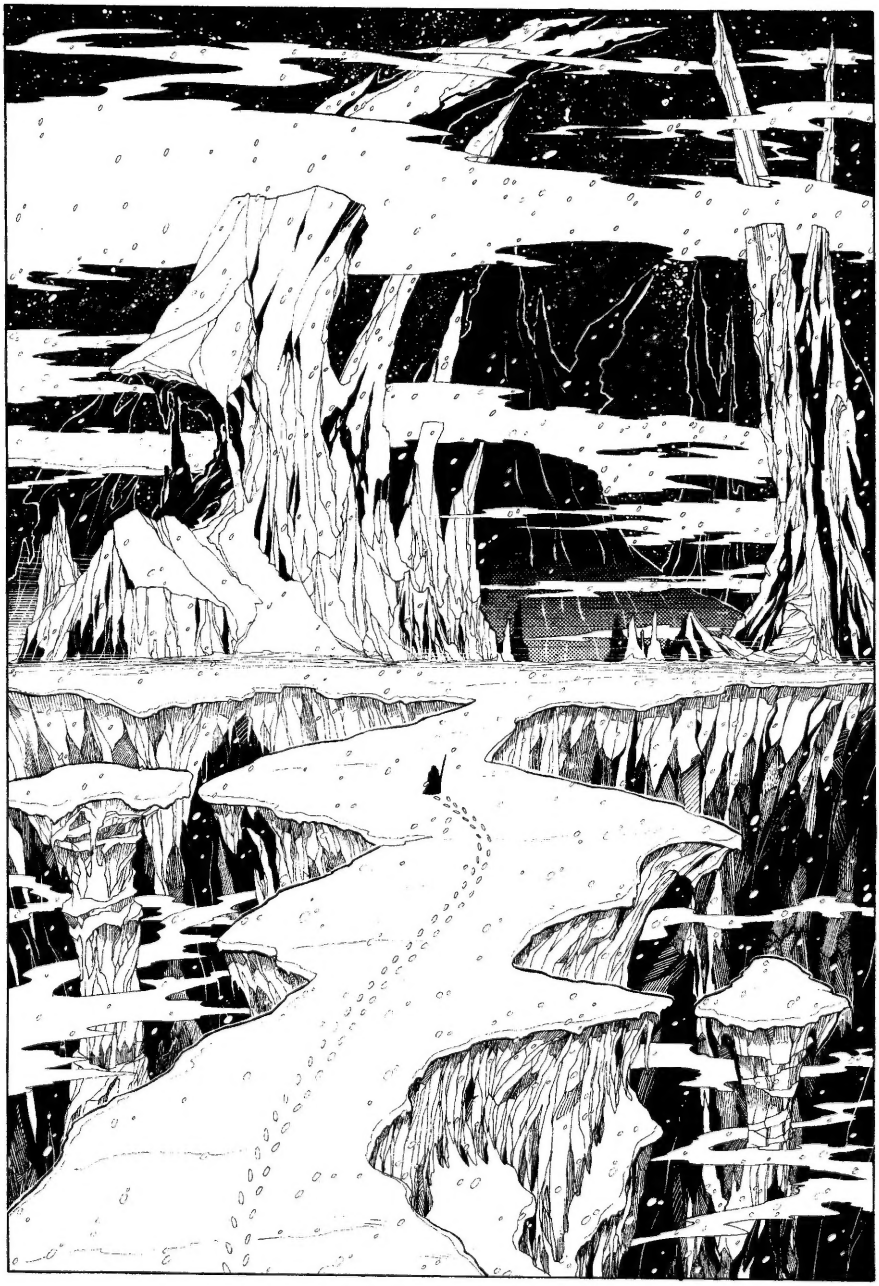
WINTERS HAVE BEEN GETTING LONGER THESE PAST CENTURIES.

SHELTER WILL BE NEEDED. MUCH STURDIER SHELTER THAN HE CAN BUILD.

SHELTER CAN BE FOUND IN THE CAVES OF NORK.

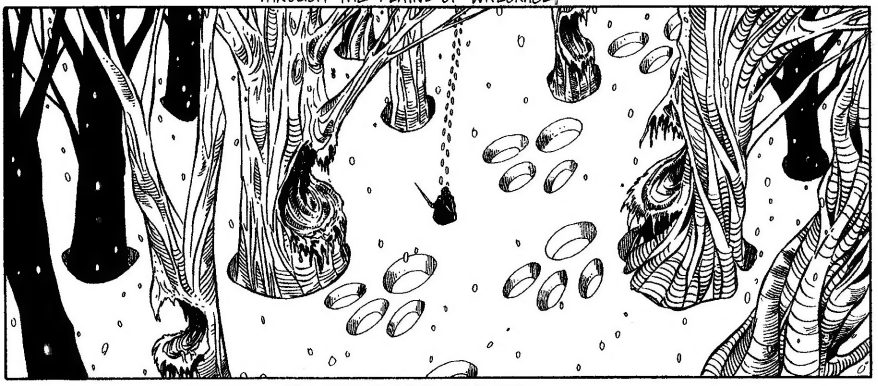


AND SO...



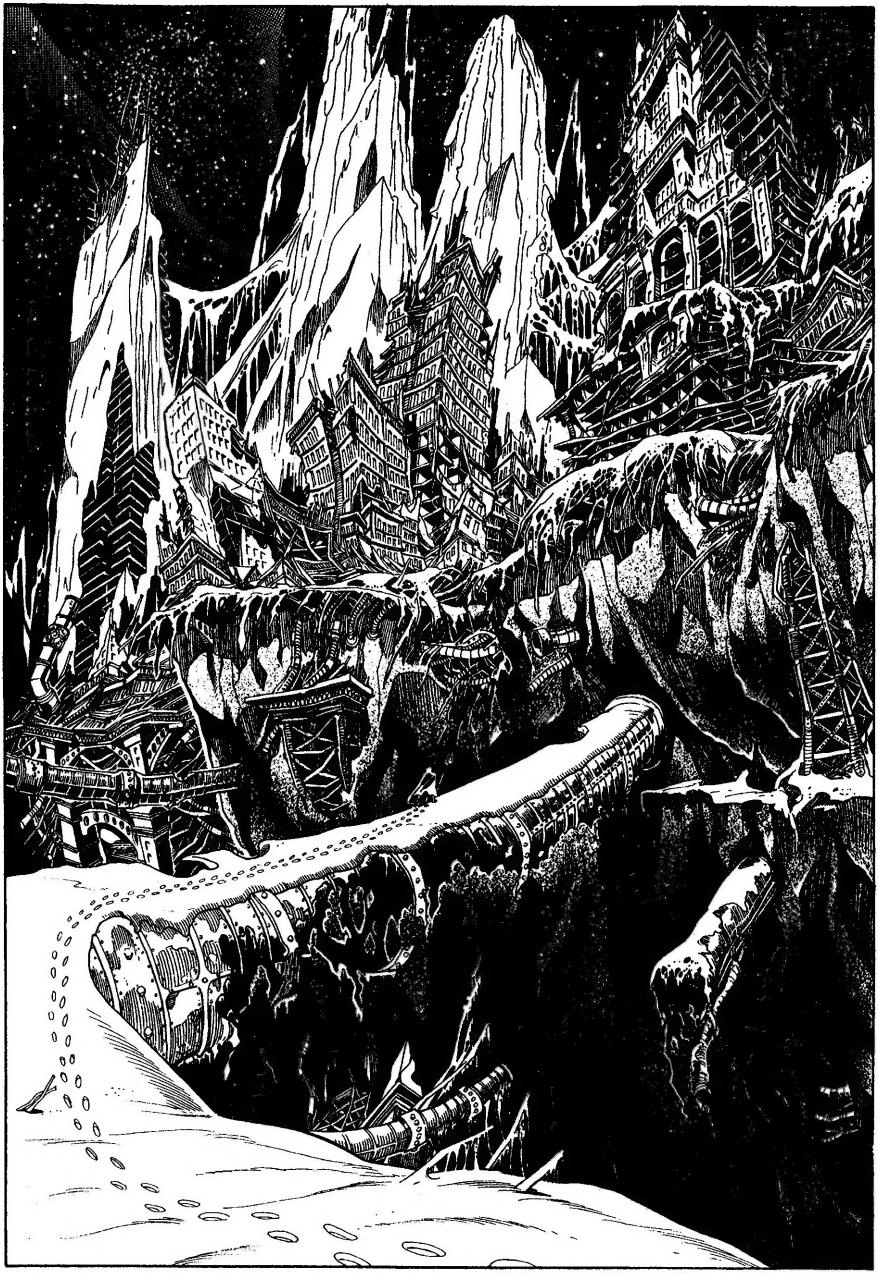
HE HEADS FOR NORK.

HE PASSES FROM THE FERTILE SOIL OF HOME
THROUGH THE PLAINS OF WRECKAGE,

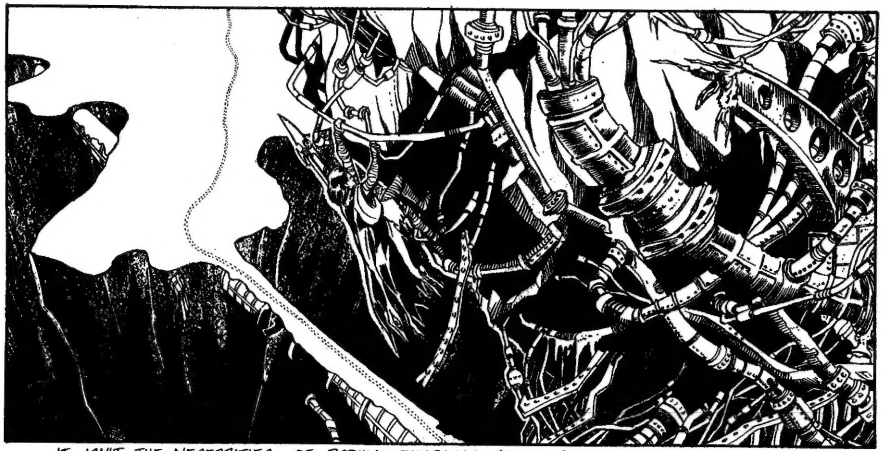


AND THE FORESTS OF DEATH,

AND THE MOUNTAINS OF DESPAIR. IT'S LONG, THIRSTY TRAVELING.
AND DAYS LATER...



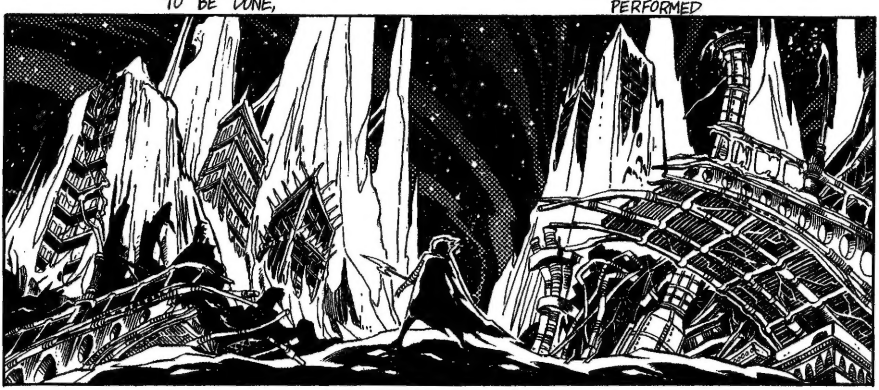
...HE IS IN NORK.



IT ISN'T THE NECESSITIES OF BODILY EXISTENCE ALONE THAT DRAW HIM HERE. AN INNER NECESSITY COMPELS HIM PERHAPS MORE STRONGLY:

THERE IS A THING TO BE DONE,

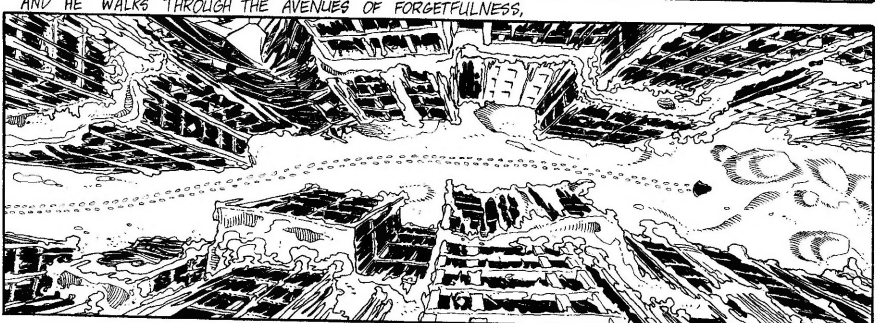
A RITUAL TO BE PERFORMED



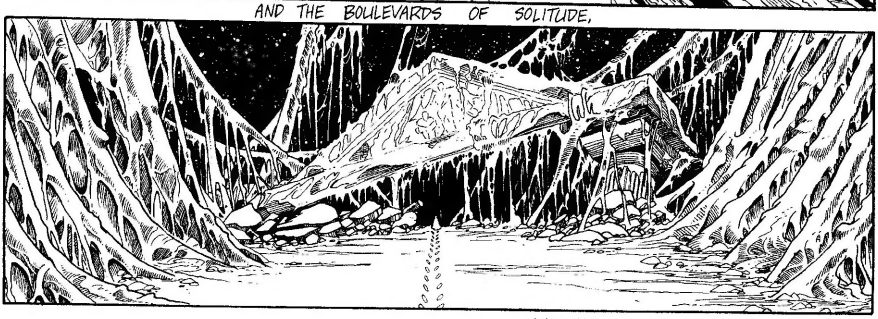
AND IT DRAWS HIM FORWARD WITH THE POWER OF ANCIENT INSTINCT.

OF COURSE, HE KNOWS NOTHING OF NECESSITY, COMPULSION, OR INSTINCT.
THESE WORDS ARE PARTS OF A LANGUAGE HE FORGOT LONG, LONG AGO. HE ONLY FEELS THE NEED.

AND HE WALKS THROUGH THE AVENUES OF FORGETFULNESS,



AND THE BOULEVARDS OF SOLITUDE,



AND THE STREETS OF ENTROPY.

NORK HAS MANY CAVES, THOUSANDS -- EVEN HE HASN'T CATALOGUED THEM ALL.

BUT IT IS ONE THAT BECKONS TO HIM,

ONE THAT HE HAS LOOKED ON MANY TIMES.

ONE THAT SPEAKS TO HIM OF SOMETHING THAT IS GONE.

A STEEP CLIMB.

A LONG HALLWAY, LONG ENCRUSTED WITH CALCIFIED NITRITE AND VOLCANIC ASH.

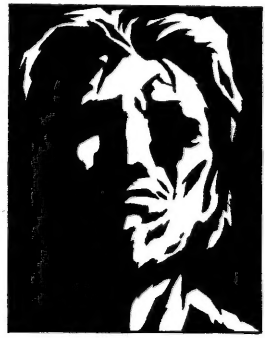
A PILE OF STONES, TO BE CAREFULLY REMOVED ONE BY ONE.

AND THEN HE ENTERS THE CAVE.

THE CONTENTS OF THE ROOM CRUMBLED INTO ATOMS LONG AGO. ONE OBJECT STANDS IN THE CENTER OF THE ROOM-- A DISPLAY CASE TAKEN FROM A MUSEUM. HE DOESN'T KNOW WHAT A DISPLAY CASE OR A MUSEUM IS, NOR HOW THE CASE CAME TO BE IN THE ROOM.

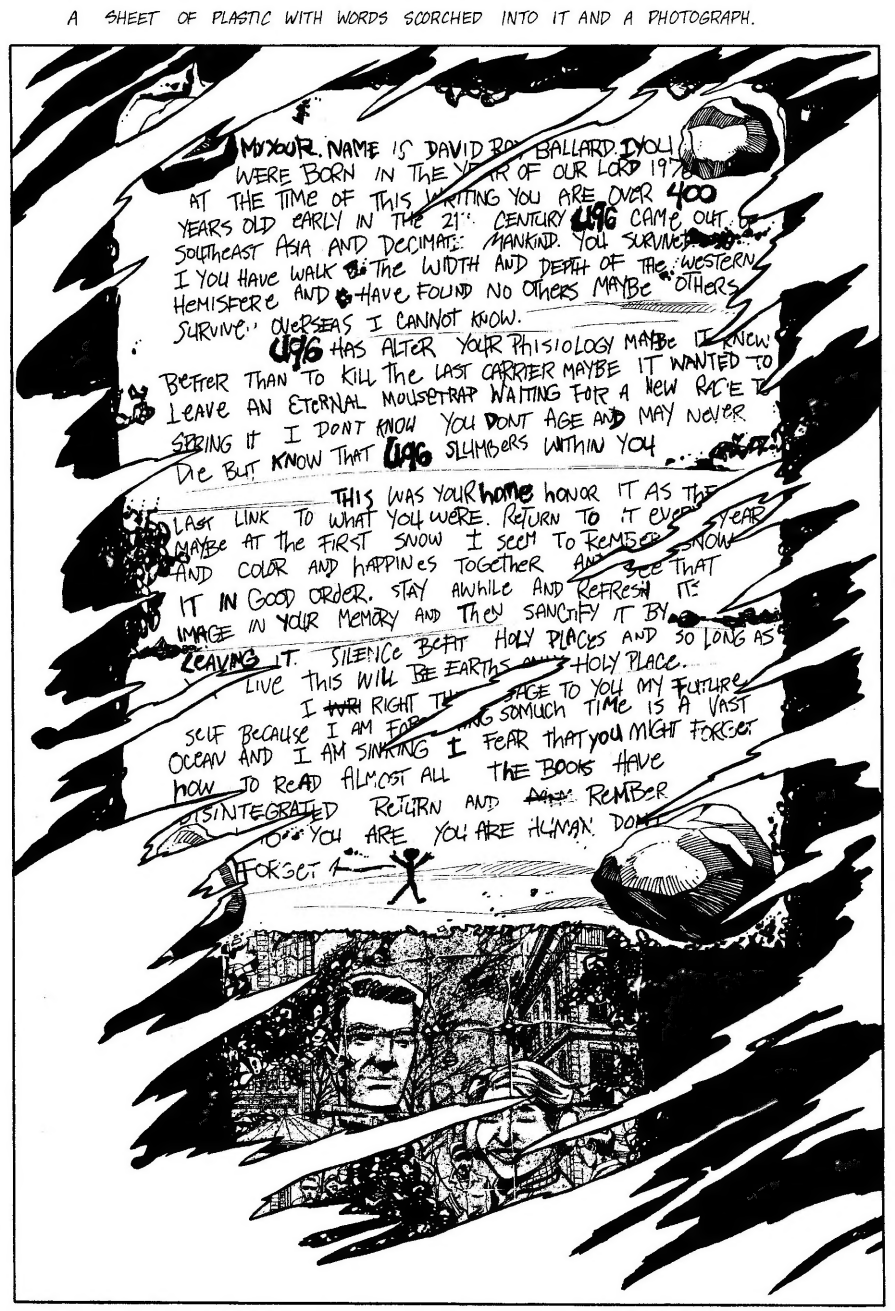
HE APPROACHES IT NONETHELESS, AS HE HAS COUNTLESS TIMES BEFORE.

HE WIPES A YEAR'S WORTH OF DUST FROM IT...



... AND LOOKS AT THE CONTENTS.

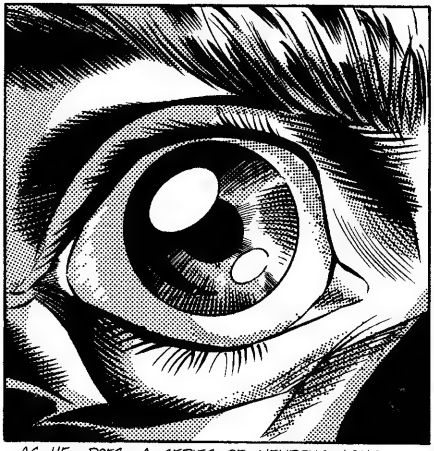
A SHEET OF PLASTIC WITH WORDS SCORCHED INTO IT AND A PHOTOGRAPH.


MY YOUR NAME IS DAVID RO BALLARD I YOU
WERE BORN IN THE YE R OF OUR LORD 197
AT THE TIME OF THIS W ITING YOU ARE OVER 400
YEARS OLD EARLY IN THE 21 CENTURY U96 CAME OUT
SOUTHEAST ASIA AND DECIMA MANKIND. YOU SURVIVE
I YOU HAVE WALK The WIDTH AND DEPTH OF THE WESTERN
HEMISFERE AND Have FOUND NO OTHERS MAYBE OTHERS
SURVIVE. OVERSEAS I CANNOT KNOW.
U96 HAS ALTER YOUR PHISIOLOGY MAYBE I KNOW
BETTER THAN TO KILL THE LAST CARRIER MAYBE IT WANTED TO
LEAVE AN ETERNAL MOUSETRAP WAITING FOR A NEW RACE TO
SERVING IT I DONT KNOW YOU DONT AGE AND MAY NEVER
DIE BUT KNOW THAT U96 SLUMBERS WITHIN YOU
THIS WAS YOUR home HONOR IT AS THE
LAST LINK TO WHAT YOU WERE. RETURN TO IT EVE YEAR
MAYBE AT THE FIRST SNOW I SEEM TO REMBER SNOW
AND COLOR AND HAPPINES TOGETHER AND SEE THAT
IT IN GOOD ORDER. STAY AWHILE AND REFRESH IT
IMAGE IN YOUR MEMORY AND THEN SANCTIFY IT BY
LEAVING IT. SILENCE BEFIT HOLY PLACES AND SO LONG AS
LIVE THIS WILL BE EARTHS HOLY PLACE.
I RIGHT TH AGE TO YOU MY FUTURE
SELF BECAUSE I AM FOR SOMUCH TIME IS A VAST
OCEAN AND I AM SINKING I FEAR THAT YOU MIGHT FORGET
HOW TO READ ALMOST ALL THE BOOKS HAVE
DISINTEGRATED RETURN AND REMBER
O YOU ARE YOU ARE HUMAN DOM
FORGET

HE CANNOT READ THE MESSAGE. HE DOES NOT REMEMBER WHAT IT SAYS, ALTHOUGH HE ONCE DID. HE DOES NOT REMEMBER THE MAN WHO WROTE IT. HE DOES NOT REMEMBER REMEMBERING. HE DOES NOT RECOGNIZE THE PEOPLE IN THE PHOTOGRAPH. BUT HE FEELS RELIEF IN KNOWING THAT THE RITUAL IS COMPLETE. OBEISANCE HAS BEEN MADE, AND ANOTHER YEAR OF SAFETY IS GUARANTEED.

AND NOW HE CAN ALLOW HIMSELF TO LEAVE.

HE CAREFULLY REPLACES THE STONES.

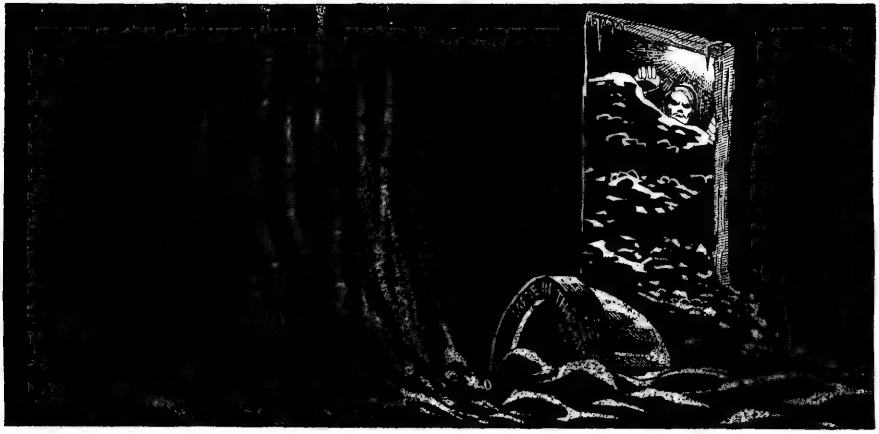


AS HE DOES, A SERIES OF NEURONS, LONG-DORMANT, FIRES RANDOMLY IN HIS BRAIN.

A MEMORY IMAGE FLARES BEFORE HIS MIND, SPENDS ITS FEEBLE ENERGY, AND FADES, LIKE A PHOTOGRAPHIC PLATE HELD TOO EARLY TO THE LIGHT.

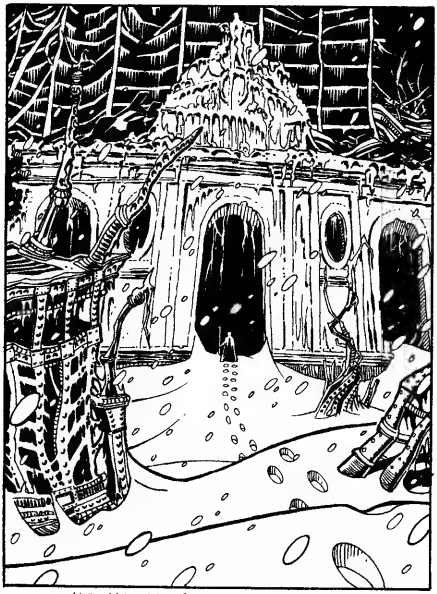
HE TRIES TO CALL IT BACK, BUT THE ERRANT IMAGE, THE LAST SUCH STOWAWAY IN HIS BRAIN...

...HAS ALREADY ADDED ITS TINY PUSH TO THE ONRUSH OF ENTROPY.



HE SPENDS THE WINTER IN THE CAVES OF NORK.

ONLY HE DOESN'T RETURN TO THE CAVE OF HIS INSTINCTS.



HE KNOWS THAT IT IS ONLY TO BE VISITED ONCE.

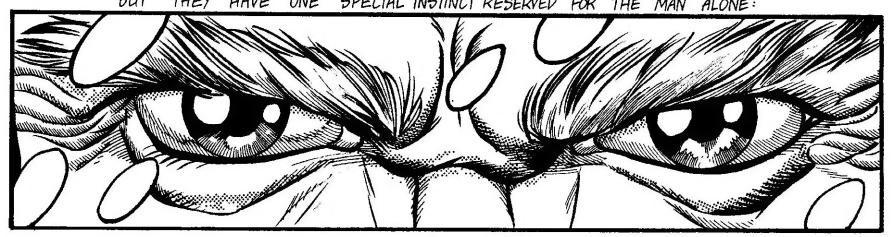
THE CAVES PROVIDE A WEALTH OF THINGS TO HUNT AND EAT.

HE DOESN'T HUNT THE *NEW ONES*, THOUGH.

THERE WAS A TIME WHEN HE TRIED-- MILLENNIA AGO-- BEFORE HE SENSED THEIR NASCENT INTELLIGENCE, THEIR SLOW PROGRESSION TOWARDS NEW ORDER AND CIVILIZATION.

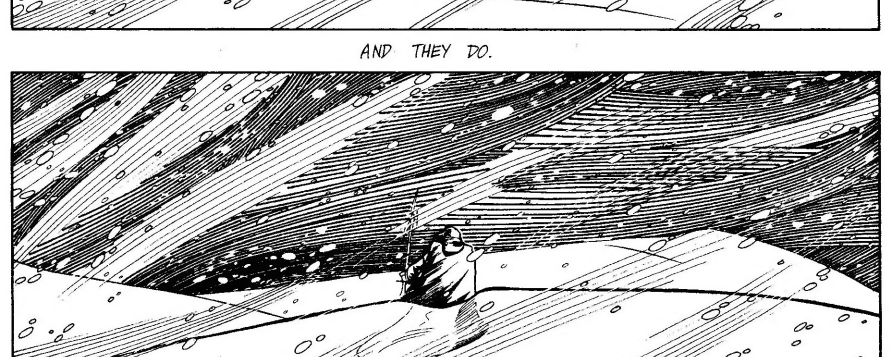
SINCE THAT TIME, HE HAS TRIED ONLY TO COMMUNICATE WITH THEM. AT TIMES HE HAS WANTED NOTHING MORE.

BUT THE NEW ONES HAVE INSTINCTS OF THEIR OWN. THE WORLD HAS LEFT A STUMBLING BLOCK IN THEIR PATH, BUT THE WORLD, WITH ITS UNERRING EQUITY, HAS LEFT THEM WITH THE KEY TO SURVIVAL. THEY KNOW NOTHING OF DISEASE, PLAGUE, 1196, OR ARMAGEDDON, BUT THEY HAVE ONE SPECIAL INSTINCT RESERVED FOR THE MAN ALONE:

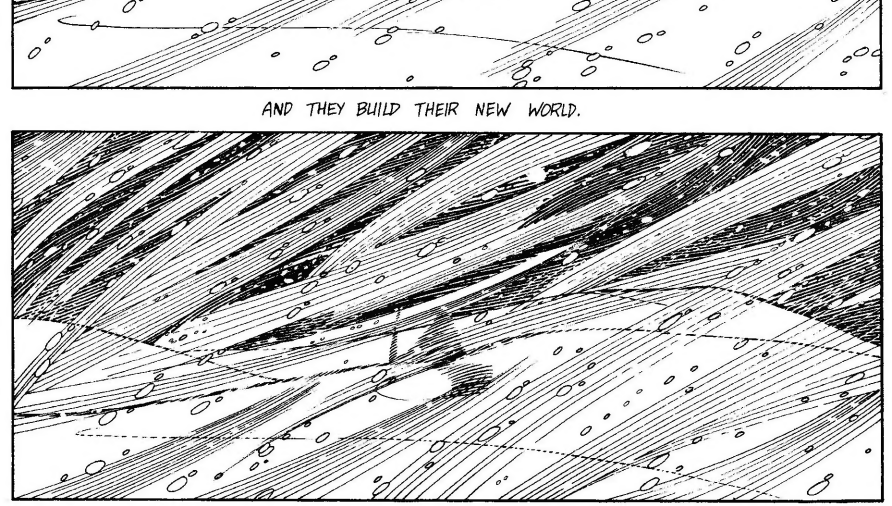


SHUN HIM.

AND THEY DO.



AND THEY BUILD THEIR NEW WORLD.



AND HE WATCHES.

AND HE WILL GO ON, THROUGH FATHOMLESS GULFS OF OBEISANCE AND PENANCE, UNTIL LONG AFTER THEY TOO HAVE GONE THE WAY OF THE HUMANS.

TO REFLECT ON THESE CEASELESS, BILLOWING WINDS OF CHANGE AND TRANSFORMATION IS TO KNOW A CONTEMPT FOR ALL THINGS MORTAL.

—MARCUS AURELIUS, *MEDITATIONS.*

FOR PODER, WITH LOVE